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Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*
Clarendon Press, 1994, £27.50, 0 19 811998 4

Jack Zipes (ed.), *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*
2nd edition, Routledge, 1993, £13.99; 0 415 908353

There are some literary critics – C.S. Lewis is prominent among them – whose work I appreciate particularly because I disagree with so much of what they write that it forces me to go back and re-examine my basis for holding different views from them. My reaction to much of Karin Lesnik-Oberstein's book is rather similar; she often writes: 'All children's literature critics say . . .' and I find myself arguing, 'I don't think this is true of *all*', so I then need to stop and think which writers provide an exception to this generalisation.

Her central contention, which she expands and justifies throughout most of this book, is that critics of children's literature, virtually without exception, assume that their task is 'to find the *good* book for the child', to say 'this is what we want children to read or not to read so that we end up with the following results . . .'. She claims that despite their widely differing views about childhood, all imply that they 'know what children are like', and most seem unaware that the 'child', as used in this sense, 'is a *construction*, constructed and described in different, often clashing terms'. This contention is very likely to make many readers feel sceptical, at least as far as contemporary children's literature criticism is concerned, though I think Lesnik-Oberstein makes quite a convincing case when she discusses earlier writers.

For me, the most valuable sections of the book are those which look at the vital period before children's literature as such is generally thought to have begun, that is from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. She illuminates the thought of Luther and Comenius, and shows how often Locke and Rousseau have been misread by those whose reading has been influenced by their own pre-conceptions. She argues that:

> Comenius's and Luther's discussions on the tension between individual readership and controlled interpretation are equally crucial to the common use of the concepts of childhood which characterise children's literature criticism (p. 57)

going on to justify this with extensive quotation. My only concern here is that Lesnik-Oberstein's approach changes very abruptly at times from straight presentation of historical material to analogy with present-day writers, which for me destroys the chronological frame of reference which is also important to the development of her argument. Talking of the debate between Erasmus and Luther, she goes on to say:

> This combining of tolerance and truth . . . occurs in the same way in much children's literature criticism . . . We see this combination of truth and tolerance in a remark made by the famous children's author E. B. White . . . (p. 61)

I am certainly interested in the affinity, but I should have much preferred learning more about the sixteenth-century material, to which she reverts shortly. This could later have been taken as a background to her reading of twentieth-century writers.

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Lesnik-Oberstein, basing her opinion on the earlier writers she has discussed, prefers with some justification to regard Locke and Rousseau as participators in the 'invention of childhood' rather than as 'discoverers of childhood'. She also renders these sages less dogmatic by showing how *particular* their writings were. She quotes Locke as saying that 'there are possibly scarce two Children, who can be conducted by exactly the same method' (p. 86). He can hardly be held responsible for the later writers who have sought to universalise his views on education.

Chapter 4 re-examines John Rowe-Townsend's split between 'book people' and 'child people', redefining them respectively as 'pluralists', who emphasise the teaching of individuality, and 'educationalists', who 'emphasise the need for mass teaching of morality and values through literature'. Looking at the work of contemporary writers, she finds that the views of both of these groups are 'mutually enmeshed and deriving from convoluted re-formulation of bits of other disciplines' (p. 128). None of these children's literature critics escapes 'paradoxes and confusions', nor, she claims, do most of those who seek to resolve these by applying adult literary theory. All, in one way or another, stumble over their explicit or implicit assumption that they *know* the 'real' child, ignoring the fact that in every case this is a construct.

My concern with much of the book is that it is too pessimistic about the endeavours of those who aspire to write children's literature criticism. What of writers who base their generalisations about 'real' children on research into children's responses to literature? No place is found in this book, or even in the bibliography of books which influenced the author's thinking, for mention of Appleyard, Protherough, Fry or Sarland. The stimulating and very different perspectives on children's books by writers such as Carpenter, Stephens, Doonan and Nodelman are also ignored, so that the (to me, false) impression is given that anyone seeking guidance either on children's books as such or on the response to them by actual children has nowhere to go. I should have appreciated more consideration of writers such as these, rather than the final chapter, which is on psychotherapy, with close attention to the work of Klein, Winnicott and Axline. I can see that analogies between the two disciplines can be created, but I'm not convinced that this is what I, as a reader of children's literature criticism, want to have my attention drawn to. The conclusion drawn from this chapter is that only the work of one psychotherapist provides any kind of useful model for children's literature criticism:

> Winnicott's effort to make it possible for the patient to use the therapist in any way necessary to that patient translates into the idea that a book gains whatever importance it may have for any reader at any time precisely by allowing the reader the space to inscribe the text in his [sic] own way into his own narrative of emotional meaning – by making it possible for the reader to create his own use for the book, whatever that may be. (p. 225)

As well as the exclusive language (surprising for a female writer in the 1990s?) this seems to me both a tortuous and a somewhat defeatist conclusion to a book which in many ways has a good deal to contribute to an understanding of the problems and limitations of children's literature criticism. It seems a pity that over-generalisation

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and rather tenuous analogies should mar a book which is on the whole both scholarly and thought-provoking.

In Scieszka's and Smith's *The Stinky Cheese Man* (1992), one of the shortest of the stories concludes:

> Red runs so fast that she beats the wolf to Granny's house. He knocks on the door. Red answers it. And guess what she says? 'My, what slow feet you have.' And that's it. *The End*. Is that great or what? So sit back, relax and enjoy – 'Little Red Running Shorts.'

This is not one of the tales featured in the second edition of Jack Zipes's *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood,* though its title is the final item on his list of 142 published versions of the story, dating from Perrault's seminal text of 1697. It is clear that there is still a good deal of life in the old tale, both in giving rise to retellings of traditional versions such as the Grimm's, and in providing a source for humorous or feminist or green adaptations. More than two a year have appeared since the 1983 edition of this book, which in itself may well be justification enough for a new, revised edition. Seven entirely new tales have been added, and as well as providing a Preface describing the changes, Zipes has added an Epilogue, 'Reviewing and Re-Framing Little Red Riding Hood', an expanded version of the chapter 'A Second Gaze at Little Red Riding Hood's Trials and Tribulations' which concludes his 1986 collection *Don't Bet on the Prince* (in which two of the seven new tales also appear).

The book is described as 'edited' by Zipes, but this doesn't really do justice to the amount of material which he gives in support of the thirty-eight tales of varying lengths. This editorial material provides an illuminating picture of the ways in which different societies have used the Riding Hood story, generally to reinforce current views of the way women should behave. For instance, Zipes discusses how the girl in Stoddart's 1864 version:

> sets a standard that all little girls of the 19th century were expected to emulate: she is kind, diligent and obedient. Not only does she help a wasp, a bird and an old woman, but she also defends the wolf at one point. (p. 44)

Even in the nineteenth century there were some parodies and humorous treatments of the story, but they were the exceptions. The twentieth century has given rise to many more varied uses, including political propaganda; one of the most effective is Phillips's 1940 version, 'Little Red Riding Hood as a Dictator would tell it' (p. 233):

> The wolf struggled with Little Red Riding Hood, using nothing but his superior strength, his long claws, his enormous teeth and his jaws of steel . . . Little Red Riding Hood fought savagely and barbarously, violating all the rules, ignoring all treaties and showing contempt for ethics. It was a terrific struggle. But the wolf won by sheer courage. He tore Little Red Riding Hood to pieces to preserve his dignity and ate her as a matter of principle.

Particularly in his concluding Epilogue, Zipes gives a good deal of attention to the way in which illustrations have been used to reinforce the messages conveyed in any

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particular version of the story. He finds that all the popular fairy tales have been illustrated in a sexist manner: 'the signs centre round male power and rationalise male domination as a norm' (p. 351). Thus he supplies a good deal of pictorial evidence (unfortunately sometimes labelled in the wrong order) that the little girl has very often been portrayed as a seductive female, often with a knowing smile, whose fate, if it had not been fended off by a strong male protector, would really have been all her own fault. Illustrations in fact are to be found throughout the book, but at times a slightly misleading effect is derived from the fact that only rarely, other than in the Epilogue, are they related directly to the text in which they occur.

Some of the most interesting material is to be found in the new sections – the Preface, the seven new tales, and the paragraphs added to the Epilogue. Here Zipes reveals some of his particular preoccupations, such as the relationship of the oral tradition to the literary. He argues that both Darnton (1984) and Dundes (1989) fail to appreciate the extent to which 'the literary origins of all our canonical fairy tales in the West mark the culmination of an oral tradition in history but certainly not its end' (p. 7). Ever since the publication of Perrault, the literary versions have inevitably influenced the oral storytellers, as well as the many other forms in which the story is found in society. Zipes particularly exemplifies some of the advertisements which, he claims, reinforce 'the notion that "women want to be raped" ' (p. 11). His concern is that a tale which was once an 'initiatory ritual concerning women' became transformed into a story of rape, and he particularly endeavours to restore some sense of a happy ending which does not, as in the Grimm version, portray the girl as helplessly dependent on the male rescuer.

To this end, several of the more recent versions of the story which he has included in this latest edition are written from a feminist perspective. One of the most interesting is Sally Miller Gearhart's 1990 story, 'Roja and Leopold', set in Silicon Valley and featuring three generations of women: Constance, a divorced business woman; Roja, her daughter; and Geraldine, the grandmother, who is dying despite Constance who 'felt it her duty to consult with doctors who kept coming up with miraculous new life-prolonging drugs and surgical techniques'. Fortunately, Leopold, a vegetarian wolf who is being persecuted because he is so reluctant to kill, is able, in a non-violent way, to help Geraldine die in peace. Constance goes off with her guru and Roja is able to resume her relationship with her lesbian lover, while

> Nearby, a woodsman, unaware of his brush with an alternate destiny, hummed an environmental tune as he dialogued with his trees and reflected on the sweet sameness of his daily routine. (p. 342)

Zipes expresses the hope that a story such as this could mark a shift in the way in which the Red Riding Hood story has been used, showing that 'women do not have to reproduce the violence of men to change the rhetoric of violence' (p. 381).

This book provides a wealth of resources – for those who want to examine the way in which cultures affect stories, for students of different literary forms and the ways in which folk tale changes. For those who want to read further, there is an extensive bibliography, both of versions of the tale and of critical and theoretical

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work. This new edition amply justifies itself – if the spate of use of this story continues, no doubt another edition will be needed by the turn of the century!

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John Powell Ward, *A Certain Marvellous Thing*
Seren Books, 1993, £5.95, 1 85411 086 1

In this moving volume, John Powell Ward addresses the most threatening issues our generation must face – the dying of our planet under the stress of human exploitation – in a voice which combines requiem with wit and technical virtuosity. A rare lyricism displays the sheer genius of its techniques without arousing the suspicion that such dexterity is intended primarily to dazzle. Wit and humour can, amazingly, mourn; and Ward's arresting imagery, condensed into every line, enables us to scan the horizons of the tarmacked globe; the blighted rainforests; the rainbow sheen of petrol that 'pampers' some as it poisons all; holed ozone; extinction of species; crush of population. But if Ward's subject matter is apocalyptic, the tone is anything but sombre or lugubrious. It is vital and full of energy: and that vitality helps us in turn to confront the ecological realities that seem in scale so devastatingly beyond our control, both as individuals and as communities, that we tend to turn away from them. Retreating to Grasmere or Haworth, we take the long view over fell or moor and draw in the inspiration of air that still *seems* so fresh and unpolluted. John Powell Ward too belongs within and recurs to these traditions, which he images in 'The Irish Sea From St Davids' as 'Waves as primaeval endless re-writing/ . . . waves quoting, citing', but reminds himself of the debris out there tainting the beauty. Our contribution to Nature has been radioactive junk and untreated sewage: 'Beautiful how sea spreads out its hands and repents./ Botulism, chemicals and raw sewage.'

The fantastic intricacy of Ward's technical tricks and devices displays an obvious affinity to Hopkins, Owen and the Welsh *cynghannedd* tradition from which Hopkins' verbal music in part derived. But the sound-patterns generated by Ward are too close to replication to suggest harmony: they are designed to echo emptily, with a sense of uncanny decline. His craft is disturbing. It advertises the fact that the poet is no longer working with quill, pencil or fountain pen but through the processing of a computer (indeed, one poem is entitled 'The Word Processor'). Hence, to commemorate the green world he uses artificial memory and printing skills devised by the same technology that has ruined the green world. The lyric beauty of Ward's poetry bears its past along with it, both moral and aesthetic, and for him as for Owen 'The poetry is in the pity', but at every moment the haunted verse-forms signal that their hour is – almost – over. Almost: for there is still a fund of intense vestigial beauty and worth in the creativity of a tradition belonging to a planet that has been accidentally reprogrammed for destruction. Ward also recalls the seventeenth-century Metaphysical mystics, Vaughan and Traherne, especially the sense of the sacred embodied

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